



**Sermon preached by
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New Brighton, Pennsylvania**

**The Ordination to the Diaconate of
Sheryl Leonard Black
February 2, 2008
The Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord**

**The Cathedral Church of St. Paul
Springfield, Illinois**

Today we celebrate the feast of Our Lord that commemorates what happened when He was 40 days old. It's a feast with three names – each one referring to a different part of that momentous day.

First is the title used by the Prayer Book – the Feast of the Presentation. Jesus was Mary's firstborn son, and according to Jewish law, every firstborn son belonged to the Lord. This dated from the last plague in Egypt, when the firstborn were all slain, except the firstborn of the Israelites, who had blood from the Passover lamb on their door posts. Since God had spared them, they belonged to Him, and sometime after the infant was 30 days old a firstborn son had to be presented to the Lord.

Occasionally, in Old Testament times, the child was dedicated for Temple service, like Samuel, and as soon as infancy was past the child came to live and serve in the Temple. Much more commonly, the infant was presented to the Lord and then redeemed – bought back – by paying a fee. In New Testament times, the fee was five Temple shekels.

So that's one name for the feast, and one part of its meaning. The infant Jesus is brought to the Temple and presented to God. For those of us who know the rest of the story, there's an irony there. God the Son is being presented to God the Father – but it was done by Mary and Joseph because they were devout, observant Jews, and in all things they wanted to observe God's law. Five times this passage tells us they were acting according to the law of the Lord.

The second name for the feast comes from the observation of another Jewish law. It's the name used more often in the Eastern churches: the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Jewish law said a woman was ritually unclean for a prolonged period after delivering a baby, 40 days after the birth of a boy, and 80 days after the birth of a girl. At the end of this time, she went to the Temple and offered a sacrifice of a dove and a lamb, or of two doves if she couldn't afford a lamb. After the sacrifice she was declared ritually clean – purified – and able to participate fully in worship again.

Our Gospel lesson tells us two details about this event that give us additional information. First, Mary and Joseph were efficient – they combined the two trips into one. The presentation had to

happen sometime after the baby was 30 days old, and the purification for the mother had to occur 40 days after the delivery. So Mary and Joseph combined the two, and brought Jesus to Jerusalem when he was 40 days old.

Second, they were poor. They made the purification offering specified for those who could not afford a lamb. But they did not let their lack of money stop them from observing God's law.

The Presentation, and the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary—those two names describe events that were to be expected: a firstborn son to be presented, and a postpartum mother to be ritually purified.

The third name— Candlemas— refers to a totally unexpected event. At least, it was unexpected by Mary and Joseph!

While they were in the temple precincts, a man named Simeon came over to them, took the Baby in his arms, and praised God. Simeon, we are told, was righteous and devout. That means he was in a right relationship with other people— righteous— and in a right relationship with God— devout. He was also a person of hope, because we are told that he looked forward to the consolation of Israel. Three times our passage mentions the Holy Spirit in connection with Simeon. The Holy Spirit rested on him. The Holy Spirit revealed to Simeon that he would see the Lord's Messiah before he died. And the Holy Spirit guided Simeon to the temple that day and hour, allowing him to meet the Holy Family. Clearly, Simeon was a person of great faith, with a close relationship to God.

And when Simeon saw the Baby Jesus, he recognized Him at once, and took Him and his arms, and said— or sang— the beautiful words we call the Nunc dimittis. “Lord, you now have set your servant free, to go in peace as you have promised. For these eyes of mine have seen the Savior, whom you have prepared for all the world to see: A light to enlighten the nations, and the glory of your people Israel.”

Put yourself in Mary and Joseph's place. They were amazed, dumbfounded, overwhelmed. They probably watched and listened with their eyes popping and their mouths hanging open, as they heard this amazing song, this prophecy, the wonderful role this Child would play in human history.

Then Simeon blessed them, and spoke words that had a grim overtone. “This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

What does that mean? It means that no one can remain neutral or indifferent to Jesus— and how a person responds makes the difference in whether one rises or falls. How we respond to Our Lord and His claims on our life reveals our inner thoughts and motives. Our response proclaims the person we truly are. Even Mary His mother had to make that decision when Our Lord began His ministry, and people said He was crazy, and Mary and Jesus' brothers came to take Him away. But then in that confrontation her path became clear, and she followed Him faithfully throughout His ministry and to the cross and the tomb. And then the sword of grief pierced her heart as well.

After Simeon had finished, Anna, a devout elderly woman who was a prophet, confirmed Simeon's words, and spoke of the Child to those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

So how do we get a name like Candlemas from that event? First, Candlemas means Candle Mass— and it refers to a celebration of Jesus, the light to enlighten the Gentiles and the glory of Israel. To celebrate that light, the early church lit candles, and over the years a candlelight procession developed as a way of acting out the coming of the light of Christ to the whole world. And then the people took home candles blessed at the church, and lit them in their homes, as a reminder that the light of Our Lord should shine there as well as in the church.

Sherry, you're a patient woman. You asked me to preach at your ordination, an honor and a joy, and here I've stood and preached about the Feast of the Presentation. You must be afraid I've gotten so carried away with the Gospel lesson that I've forgotten the ordination part.

Not so! As I look at this lesson in the context of your ordination as deacon, I think of my years in medical school and residency. During that time I was exposed to hundreds of doctors, and learned something from each one. From one, I learned to sit down, at eye level, when dealing with a worried parent. From one I learned a quick trick for reducing a nursemaid's elbow. From a few, I learned NOT to do something, because they were terrible examples! But my practice of medicine was formed from study and from observing others, and incorporating into my repertoire things that I had learned from others.

So I would commend to you that you study this passage again, in the context of ministry. What have Mary and Joseph and the Baby Jesus and Simeon and Anna to teach us about ministry?

What can we learn from the Baby? In this story He never says a word, never does a miracle or heals anyone. He is growing, preparing for the future. He is being, not doing. Sometimes ministry will be being, not doing.

What can we learn from Mary and Joseph? For one thing, we can learn the importance of living within the Law of God. As Christians we're no longer under the Law, but the Law is a revelation of God and His nature, and we're wise to live in God's way. Secondly, we can learn to be efficient, to think and plan so that our responsibilities can be fulfilled. Third, don't buy into the world's view. To worldly eyes, Mary and Joseph were too poor to afford a lamb, so they brought a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons. Yet they carried in their arms the King of the whole universe, and those who were too poor to buy a lamb brought to the Temple the unique Lamb of God, the perfect sacrifice for the sin of the world. As St. Teresa of Avila said, "Whom God possesseth in nothing is wanting. Alone, God sufficeth." Don't buy into the world's view.

What can we learn from Simeon? We can learn to be righteous and devout, to be people of hope who look confidently to the future and the fulfilling of the Kingdom of God. We can listen to the revelations of the Holy Spirit and be guided by the Spirit in where we go and what we do and say. We can learn that our first response, when we see God at work in the world, should be to praise God, as Simeon did.

What can we learn from Anna, the elderly prophet? We can learn to speak about Jesus to all whom we meet. And we can learn that we are never too old to serve God!

So, Sherry, beginning on this special day, be Simeon. You're a baptized person, so you've received the Holy Spirit. But today, in your ordination, the Spirit rests on you in a new way, with new gifts. Be a person who listens to the Spirit, who is guided by the Spirit. Be someone who is righteous in your dealings with others. Be devout in your relationship with God. And be a person of hope, looking confidently to God's future, even in the midst of our church's current troubles. Be Simeon.

Be Anna. Speak of Jesus to all whom you meet, all who are looking for redemption. Be Anna.

But perhaps most of all, be Mary. Be observant in the practice of your faith. Don't sell out to the world's point of view. Don't let the threat of pain or difficulty keep you from your ministry. And remember that just as Mary was the theotokos, the God-bearer, so Christ dwells in you, and you bring Him with you into every situation, the Light that enlightens the nations, and the glory of God's people Israel.

Amen.